WITH AN EVERLASTING LOVE

Easter Sunday, April 15, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Jeremiah 31:1-6, 13-14
Matthew 28:1-10

"I have loved you with an everlasting love."
-Jeremiah 31:3b (RSV)

It was the little boy's first encounter with death. He had experienced his great-aunt Gladys as grouchy, stuffy, not fond of children in general and of him in particular. At the memorial service he leaned over to his mother and, in a stage whisper all could hear asked, "Where is Aunt Gladys now?" His mother, aware that several rows of worshipers had heard the question and were listening with avid interest for her answer - that being the theological question - answered, "Aunt Gladys has gone to heaven to be with God." He thought about it for a moment, rolled his eyes heavenward, and said, out loud, "Poor God."

Conrad Hyers in his book, And God Created Laughter, reminded us several years ago that one of the oldest Christian traditions is the Easter Joke. In a recent essay he elaborates: "There is an old custom long disappeared except from a few Orthodox churches, in which Christians would meet in church on the Monday after Easter for a festival. A feast was prepared. There were games and folk dancing in the church yard. People even gathered in the sanctuary to tell jokes and humorous anecdotes... they believed it was the most fitting way to celebrate the big joke God pulled on Satan in the resurrection." [The Presbyterian Survey, April 1990]

Hyers notes that religion and the Christian Church are generally associated with solemnity, somberness; that laughter seems irreverent and the cultural mindset is that public worship is "something you are to endure because it is 'good for you' like bad tasting medicine."

And so, the Easter Joke... The Little Boy and Aunt Gladys is his - because what we have come today to hear and sing about and celebrate is the most incredibly happy idea anybody ever had. In fact, it is so happy it stretches language to the breaking point... And all we are able to do finally is sing it and weep it, and hold each other - and laugh.

Each year the preacher scans the culture for resources: looking, watching, reading, listening for some fresh approach. The preacher knows, as no one else knows, that his/her task on this day is by its nature an impossible one; that to stand up here and try to talk rationally about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only presumptuous, but maybe even misleading. In fact, even the art is disappointing. Every artist worth his salt has had a try at the nativity and the crucifixion. Some of our best paintings are of the annunciation, the gentle virgin, the manger, the magi; and some of the most powerful art is about the Passion - the trial, Christ scourged, mocked, Christ crucified, Christ on the cross, done in every era, in every conceivable genre, Christ lowered from the cross, Christ in the arms of his mother - The Pieta. It's almost as if the resurrection exceeds even the creative imagination. There is some, but not much, great resurrection art. Musically, the same is true. The great oratorios, chorales, are about birth and death. An exception is the Hallelujah Chorus from Messiah, which is, as Handel wrote it, resurrection music. But we have, in our day, converted it, and made it into Christmas music.

Part of the preacher's problem with the resurrection, unlike the birth and crucifixion of Jesus, is that the resurrection is simply difficult to believe. That's not new, by the way. Jesus' friends and disciples didn't believe it either. Luke lets that slip into his account: Luke says they thought it was an idle tale and didn't believe it when the women came back from the tomb, babbling incoherently. So, take comfort in that... no one finds it easy to believe. Writing in the Christian Century, Elmhurst College's Ronald Goetz observes that "The whole of the modern and the post-modern eras has burned into our consciousness the scientific, psychological and ontological impossibility of a resurrection." [p. 331, Christian Century, April 1, 1990] Which is a fancy way of saying that we know better, or think we know better, or hope we know better than to believe we live in an unpredictable universe where there is mystery and transcendence and miracles and dead men come back to life. We modern, literate Christians are embarrassed by it. We'd prefer it if Jesus died a principled, noble, martyr's death and stayed dead. It's so irrational... so subjective... so unscientific... Of course, the scientists themselves are now warning us against assuming that we know everything, showing us a universe full of mystery and surprises, cautioning us against what someone called the "Imperialism of the Enlightenment," i.e. the assumption that if it can't be proved in a laboratory it isn't true. Nonetheless we have trouble with it because it assaults the very foundation of the way we view the world... And for what comfort you can derive from it, please know that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has been doing that ever since Mary and Mary went to the tomb toward dawn on the first day of the week.

And that's another of the peculiarities about this occasion. If you want to know exactly what happened in that garden, early in the morning before the sun came up, and if you assume the Bible will give it to you straight, you are in for a disappointment. There are four Gospels: four different accounts of what happened on Easter morning. They agree on very little. In fact there's a lot of confusion. People are running around in the dark, literally bumping into one another. They are skeptical, frightened, joyful and very surprised. The four accounts agree on two matters. One - no one went to the garden of Joseph of Arimathea where

Jesus was buried and where the Romans had posted a guard expecting to find a resurrection. They went either to anoint the body with spices and oils, or simply to grieve, the way you go to the cemetery the day after the funeral, just to be there, to weep alone, for closure, to say something inane to the pile of fresh dirt - like "Goodbye. I love you." Nobody in the New Testament goes to the tomb to celebrate Easter. That's number one.

Number two is that after they got there everybody agreed that the tomb was empty. He wasn't there. But the empty tomb does not in fact convince anyone of anything except that somebody must have taken the body. The point is what the Bible says clearly about Easter morning is there is a lot of confusion, running back and forth, bumping into one another and then, the laughter, the joy, the knowledge which is really more than knowledge, that God has done something incredible, something which exceeds our ability to describe it.

So we've got an intellectual problem on our hands, and a bit of a Biblical problem, and before that we have an aesthetic problem. But we don't have nearly as serious a problem as our retail merchant neighbors. It is amusing to observe the herculean imagination the commercial world must summon to try to turn the Christian festival of the resurrection into bottom-line reality. You think Pontius Pilate had a problem. Think of Bloomingdales. Here it is in April and as of the middle of Holy Week the snow was still flying and the winter wools still felt pretty good. On top of that, the theme is challenging, to say the least. Christmas offers a whole cast of characters with wonderful human appeal and a story to touch every heart and checkbook. But what in the world are you going to do with a dead Jewish carpenter, executed for sedition, and the appalling rumor that he didn't stay dead? Is it any wonder the culture goes with bunnies and chicks and eggs and bonnets and baskets?

Now, there is surely nothing harmful about rejoicing in the return of springtime, nor is celebrating the essential fertility and sensuality of creation, nor is sprucing up your wardrobe - just in case spring comes - unless somehow you get that confused with the resurrection.

The main method for resolving all the intellectual and aesthetic problems we have with resurrection is to regard it as a metaphor. What lives on is Jesus' spirit; his love and compassion... Sometimes that's what the preacher says.

John Updike wrote a poem about it once: Seven Stanzas for Easter:

> "Make no mistake: if He rose at all
> it was as His body...
>
> "It was not as the flowers
> each soft spring recurrent
> it was not as His spirit in the mouths
> and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles:
> it was as his flesh: ours."

Updike knows what the issue is for modern intellectuals.

"Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence:
making of the event a parable..."

The poet has it right, I think. There's a sense in which we need to take the resurrection straight or not at all, to look honestly at the proclamation and promise and summons of this day.

"Let us not seek to make it less monstrous
for our own convenience, our own sense of
beauty..."
[Telephone Poles & Other Poems, p. 72]

You see Easter is not about spring time and flowers and bunnies. It is not even about Jesus' gentle spirit living on beyond him. It is about the deadly reality of human life. Easter is about the drama of one who came to the city, out of a passionate love for God and God's Kingdom of justice and compassion; and he offended the sensitivities of the properly religious, the politically powerful and with a small assist from an apathetic crowd of urban onlookers was framed, betrayed, denied, tried, tortured and executed within a few days.

It's monstrous. And it's real. It's as real as the homeless man sleeping in the Lake Shore Drive underpass as we all walked to the Sunrise Service this morning. It's as real as young Ryan White's tragic and senseless death, as little children perishing in their burned-out home on the South Side, as a young couple anticipating the birth of their first child - murdered in their basement. It's as real as babies with leukemia and friends dying decades before they should die, and long marriages ripped apart by random disease. Easter begins with the honest affirmation that life can be, and often is, tragic. Easter begins with the crucifixion of Jesus on Friday. Easter begins personally when we stand under that cross and hear our dearest friend cry out the words everyone of us has or one day will cry, "O God, why have you forsaken me?"

Why, if you never come to church on another Sunday, do you come on Easter? We know, at a depth beyond intellect, that this day is about fundamental things; about the fundamental human need to live fully, confidently, joyfully in a world where there is death and suffering and tragedy. "What," Walter Bruggemann asked, "will permit me to come out from behind my desk, my stethoscope, my uniform, my competence, my credentials, my fears - to meet life a little more boldly?" [Finally Comes the Poet, p. 11]

What you and I need more than anything else is some sense that beneath everything else there is a firm foundation: that in spite of - indeed in the presence of whatever tragedy occurs, we are safe: that in the presence of the possible loneliness, meaninglessness and despair that may descend on us in life, our lives matter and are precious and cherished. What you and I need is to know that the struggle is worth it; our battles fought for Jesus are not in vain; that in spite of set backs, his Kingdom of peace and justice will triumph. Our deepest need is to know that the issue of our own death, our ultimate destiny has been resolved and that therefore we are free to live boldly and joyfully.

It is our boldest and our most important belief. And it helps to remember that it is theology. The resurrection, our friend, Jack Stotts, said to a group of ministers recently, is ultimately not a doctrine about us so much as it is about God. What we are saying, what the New Testament is proclaiming in the resurrection, is the integrity and faithfulness of God. God does not abandon what God has created. God does not turn away from the creation. God can be trusted. God will be faithful. Nothing, not even death, interrupts or limits God, or God's love and care.

It is one of the oldest motifs in Scripture. Long before Jesus our best poets and most articulate theologians were trying to find ways to say it.

> "Even in the valley of the shadow of death
> I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Or - beautifully -

> "weeping may tarry for the night
> but joy comes with the morning...
> Thou has turned my mourning into dancing."

They recited and sang those songs centuries before Jesus - on good days and bad days. Some of the worst of them came when God's people were wrenched from hearth and home and held in exile in Babylon. And in the middle of that a prophet by the name of Jeremiah wrote:

> "Then shall the maidens rejoice in
> the dance,
> and the young men and the old
> shall be merry.
> I will turn their mourning into joy..."

> "I have loved you with an
> everlasting love."

It is there from the beginning, this notion almost too big to contain in words, that the power behind all of creation is benevolent, kind, loving: that it can be trusted: that nothing, no thing - no tragedy, no sickness, no death - can alter that basic, fundamental reality... The power which is love - that reality we call God. It is there from the beginning. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is about God's integrity and faithfulness.

So each year the preacher scans the culture for an assist, for an inspiration, for some clue disguised in the life of the world and he or she reads and listens carefully and watches.

And this year finds Ryan White, for instance, whose death did not, in fact, overcome his life: whose inevitable dying was somehow faced and lived through with courage and grace and something like cheerfulness.

Or, turning to the academic theologians, finds again, Hans Kung, who with scholarly integrity, looks at it from the perspective of history, science, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and comes at last to the final reality of his own death and says simply but eloquently:

> "I have confidence God will have
> something to say... that he has the last word
> as he had the first: that he is the God of
> the end as well as the God of the beginning."
> [Eternal]

And this a special gift: Julian of Norwich, 600 years ago reflecting on life in the often tragic and grim 14th century said in a way that is timeless:

> "Life
> is a precious thing
> to me
>
> and a little thing:
>
> my life is a little thing,
> when it will end here
> is God's secret.
>
> And the world
> is a little thing,
> like a hazelnut
> in his - her hand -
>
> but it is in his ever-keeping,
> it is in his ever-loving,
> it is in his ever-making,
>
> how should any thing be amiss?
>
> Yes, all shall be well,
> and all will be well,
> 'and thou shalt see thyself
> that all manner of thing
> shall be well.'"

Then having exhausted all the resources the summons is to look inside. The summons is to go, as Mary did, to the place of burial. To the place where the reality of human life cannot be disguised: to the place where they buried Jesus of Nazareth: to the place where those you love are buried. The summons is to see the faces of those you love or have ever loved and to know that they are safe in God's infinite love - and so are you.

The summons is to quietly confront the reality of human life, your own life, and to trust, in Professor Kung's image, that our dying is not "passing into nothingness, but a homecoming into God's mystery."

The summons is to know deeply and profoundly that we are loved with an everlasting love... to hear again words which exceed our ability to comprehend.

"You seek Jesus who was crucified.
He is not here, for he is risen..."

And then, in one way or another, to do what those women did: depart quickly, in fear and joy: to go back to life - to love and work and struggle... disappointment and failure and success and weeping and laughter - carrying on your heart the incredible news that death has been overcome! God has turned mourning into dancing... sorrow into joy... death into life... Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

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Holy God, startle us with your truth. Turn our mourning into dancing... and hear our gratitude for this day... Gratitude for which we have no words, gratitude for this newness... this goodness... this life... through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.